

'Impact' Debate II: further member responses to the BSA President

Continuing the discussion about the impact of sociology which took place in the summer (2009), John Brewer invited further feedback from members during the autumn. The responses received are reproduced here (anonymised).

RESPONSE 23

If sociology is not making an impact why are we doing it? This thought is encouraged by a sense of imminent large-scale change as western advanced countries find that the terms of globalization have turned against them. New times, new analyses, new values - sociologists need to be up there selling their wares. Consumerism, identity and postmodernism will be out - along with neo-liberalism. Scarcity, distributional issues - who gets what and why - will be back along with sharper political and sociological boundaries.

That said, "impact" as a scientific concept is crude. It assumes the immediacy of effect, the easy identification of causal factors, and that 'scientific' results can be the basis for policy change. The social world, as we know, is much more complex than that. I mean, what is the scientific justification for "impact" as a discriminating concept? The concept is a hard quant economic import - and the world of economics has just imploded. "Utility" is even more useless as a concept - not least because it is intrinsically subjective. Is utility research like utility furniture - squat, ugly and badly finished?

However, we have to roll with the punches. The government is reeling because of the financial and fiscal crisis. They want to know what return they have got from their investment in human capital and the RAE.

In place of impact, or its operationalisation, why not argue for significance, relevance, importance, methodological validity and science as public discourse? You don't read Urry on how to make cars lighter - which would be a crude notion of "impact" - but rather the transformational requirements of society, communication and technology.

Giddens uses game theory to discuss climate change - it becomes an educational argument not a policy prescription. (We need more examples here.)

A last critical point. Hefce (and RAE) are regarded by the two main parties as a quango, and radical change could follow - also to research councils. In any major reorganisation of h.e. the social sciences and humanities may want to consider cutting themselves free from the invasive scrutiny of hefce, rae and their local agents; also cut free from stem subjects. Research within a learning community - now that's a thought!

RESPONSE 24

Thanks for the opportunity to discuss the impact of sociology, and thanks for your stimulating opening remarks. I agree with you on the need for a narrative (though I'm sick of hearing that concept – a new 'holy grail', I fear!)

My position/argument/line (old-fashioned terms now bundled as narratives, which of course used to be called stories) is that *sociology is one of the best tools with which society can think about itself and is excellent at stimulating a debate about how to reduce its worst features and increase its best.*

I agree with you about building alliances – partnerships, at best – with other bodies who might listen to, be influenced by, or share our position. But I think this should take place at all levels of society: in the middle layers (civil society in villages, towns, cities) and at the grass-roots (estates, inner cities etc) as well as at the top.

A couple of own 'impact' examples are:

(1) *Thinking Cohesion*: a discussion group composed of senior reps from the West Yorkshire police, the council, the Leeds development agency, the voluntary and inter-faith sector, the regional government office and Leeds Met academics (in small minority). It examines current national documents on community cohesion and invites speakers from other towns with relevant experience. It is the only opportunity members of this group have to simply think and debate, without reference to specific targets. It thus brings a much-needed extra dimension to policy and practice in this important field.

(2) *The David Oluwale Memorial Committee*: this group aims to build a memorial in Leeds to a Nigerian vagrant who was brutalised by members of the Leeds police force in the late 1960s, two of whom were accused of his murder, and then imprisoned for assaulting him. The committee includes reps from the Catholic and Anglican Bishops' offices, leading figures in the voluntary sector, the West Indian Centre, the Nigerian Community Group and Stop Hate UK. Research on this case is included in two recent books on Oluwale's life and death. My experience of research and work in the multi-ethnic inner city informs the reconciliatory ethos the committee has adopted.

Both of these represent applications of forty years of living, working and researching in the inner-city areas of Leeds. Like many other 'practical' sociologists I seek to build partnerships with people and organisations who are concerned to both think and act in pursuit of social justice. This, for me, is the point of sociology. More theoretical expositions of this point of view can be read in

Farrar, Max with Taylor, Richard (2009) 'University-Community Engagement: analysing an emerging field' in Denton, Steven and Brown, Sally (eds) (2009) *A Practical Guide to University and College Management: Beyond Bureaucracy*, London: Routledge

Farrar, Max (2009, forthcoming) 'Cracking the Ivory Tower: proposing "an interpretive public sociology"' in Burnett, Judith, Jeffers, Syd and Thomas, Graham (eds.) (2009) *New Social Connections: Sociology's Subjects and Objects*, London: Palgrave

RESPONSE 25

I am working as a sociologist applied within a particular medical department. The mantras in medicine are currently 'evidence based medicine' and 'translational research'. The latter applies to the notion of 'from bench to bed side', (bridge between discovery in the laboratory by basic scientists to delivery within clinical

practice by nurses/doctors and health service researchers). Sociologists tend to focus on the bedside end of the continuum, trying to make patients the focus of research and the way health service can be best delivered to them. Needless to say that most funding goes to the bench side of the translational research continuum, with increasing pressure from universities to collaborate with industry . However, increasingly, health economists are part of multi-disciplinary grant application to find out whether any new medical interventions (e.g. treatments) provide value for money. Sociologists tend to be a marginalised group in medicine, depending what medical discipline one is part of. Many findings from socio-medical studies are difficult to get into medical journals that clinicians would read and take note of, and therefore end up in medical-sociological papers, which are hardly read by busy medical staff members. So the impact on medical practice is often difficult to quantify and slow.

In a different context, medical sociologists have been in the forefront to uncover hidden agendas that operate within big institutions/organisations such as hospitals or medical schools that are important, although often not welcomed by the medical establishment. Much more research in this area is needed, but researchers who carry out studies in this area of disclosing hidden realities are reluctant to go public, due to fear of negative repercussion.

Being taken seriously and making an impact in sociology versus powerful other players is a challenge that many sociologists are confronted with on a daily basis in medicine. Taking patient as researcher partners onto your side is one powerful way to become more visible and affective, given the Department of Health agenda of public and patient involvement in research.

RESPONSE 26

I was very impressed with this and your articulate comments about it in the THE. This is especially important at the time when we are being required to take seriously the THE's latest league tables of universities which do not take into account more complex and detailed analysis of social and economic impact of research. It is a 'real' irony that we should be discussing these two alongside each other. Quite clearly we are inhabiting parallel universes, including universities.

RESPONSE 27

Joining the debate after 20 plus people have put forward their views means that much of what I would want to contribute has already been covered. Hence here I will link in my ideas with those of others.

I must admit that the British Academy letter by a group of economists in response to HMQ's question, why did no one foresee the credit crunch?, reported in the 'liberal' press in July 2009, came to mind when reading your fourth paragraph about the way sociology and other social sciences engage with civil society. This is taken up by respondent no. 10, detailing the economist's letter in full. The letter states that, as far as economists were concerned, there had been a 'failure to see risk to the system as a whole'; 'bright people' had been 'charmed by the market'; there was a degree of

'delusion' and 'failure of the collective imagination'; as a 'series of interconnected imbalances' produced the credit crunch. The solution they suggest is to develop 'a new, shared, horizon-scanning capability'. It is this latter capability to think about interconnections and reflect forward and backward that respondent no 10 and many other respondents think is provided by sociology. I agree.

Respondent no 4 suggests that sociology and the social sciences provide a vital element in a liberal education, as well as in understanding social processes within organisations of all remit - entrepreneurial, welfare, educational, etc. Respondent no 6 refers to social science literacy as being invaluable for the same reason. I agree.

Referring to your fifth paragraph it is essential that opportunity costs as well as benefits are considered in research - whether it be into housing, ageing, or sport policies and practices. In the sub-discipline that I work and am familiar with as editor of a journal sociology offers the capability to look at 'cultural life' – sport, tourism, arts, informal leisure, outdoor recreation - in the round. Nor will simply seeking technical or technological fixes to societal problems will not do (as respondent 13 suggests).

Rightly though you and the respondents argue that ways forward need to be found - to engage with stakeholders (respondent 16), create coalitions of social science organisations (respondent 17), whilst also arguing for specific methodological and theoretical insights provided by the discipline (respondent 18). I agree.

RESPONSE 28

Thanks for sharing the result of your sociology research questions. Where will we go from here now? Can we have publishing mentor contacts? Something of this nature.

RESPONSE 29

I agree that economic factor is important for sociology if we want to advance it for economic, cultural and academic survival. That is the reality. We must not be too defensive about sociology in its present shape and form. Some of the responses I read on impact from the BSA website appear to be so. Sociology has served its purpose well. We are in a very different paradigm now. It is time to move onto high planes. We need to find suitable 'marriage partners' by linking with industries such as car, oil, arts, law, fashion or retail, impact of rising crimes and effect of migration. We also need to broaden our horizon by establishing a 'marriageable relationship' more with our European, American, Canadian and Eastern (China and South East Asia) counterparts. We can invite significant industrialists like Sir Alan Sugar, Philip Green or politicians like Tony Blair, Cherie Blair (Law), David Cameron, Gordon Brown and the Leader of Liberal Party etc to be our key-note speakers at conferences and other events. It is not, I think, too difficult to engage them as long as we can convince them of our worth and give them plenty of time to respond.

In my view, we should also establish a global sociology in view of climate changes and global economic recession. Send notices of our conferences and events to

America, Canada and China etc. Don't expect them to find us. My experience of attending conferences in America and Canada over the last 8 years has been that the conference delegates I have spoken to knew little or nothing about British sociology or of the existence of our conferences and events. Some of them have never heard of our 'established' sociologists and their work!

Thank you so much for starting this debate! Don't let it go on too long. We need to put words into actions fast.

RESPONSE 30

My personal worry as a medical sociologist is that different units of assessment or 'disciplinary groups' will assess contributions differently.

In the natural sciences and health there appears to be an overreliance on metrics whilst the social sciences and humanities appear to go more for impact measured in qualitative ways. This makes it hard for sociologists doing interdisciplinary research and also puts people like me, as a sociologist in a health environment, in a schizophrenic position.

RESPONSE 31

Thanks. I agreed with everything you said in your impact piece. It was a good document, though it throws up difficult 'challenges' as they say, for the future of the discipline.

I particularly agreed with your emphasis on the 'impact' involved in teaching. After all, we send out people who get jobs in the public sector, journalism, new media, and HR department's who often readily say that their sociological understanding has been directly important for their careers, especially those who have communicative and policy roles of importance. So even if indirect, these impacts are vital and deserve the fullest crediting.

This isn't fully relevant to the REF of course, which is more targeted around current projects and outputs. Their impact 'case studies' suggestion is a good one in the sense that they are tacitly admitting that it is crazy to ask everyone to show their impact credentials, better to focus on a handful of projects/lines of research activity in each unit and demonstrate their actual or potential. Off line, funding council people accept that impact is vague and diverse and probably will remain so. So our collective feedback in the REF consultation must be to say, without simply opposing impact (including, I agree, not rubbishising economic impact where it can possibly be found), that this fuzziness is a good thing not a bad thing; and also not being afraid at this stage to speak up for reversing the impact/environment proportions. We could even say we accept this as 'transitional' until the impact culture changes, which necessarily takes time.

In the medium and longer term, I think we are going to have to try to reform the image of the discipline and its staff recruitment strategies too. I agreed very much with your own and O'Neill's emphasis on working with science and medicine.

Increasingly being something of a positivist, by which I DON'T necessarily mean methods-training-fixation, which strikes me as dim, if necessary, positivism, I don't think we or our students actually KNOW enough about the world, about the sciences, or fully accept that this is going to have to be one of our principal future niches. You can see it right now, rather embarrassingly: science and engineering funding bodies are requiring interdisciplinarity and social considerations as sine qua non for funding, so colleagues in those areas reach out to us and say, how can you help with, not only environment etc, but nano- and bio- changes. But most of us don't really know how to take up these offers and appeals. Even more embarrassing is the 'post-positivist' gut reaction which sometimes surfaces here - that, hey, we want to question your epistemological assumptions here before we come to an arrangement. It could be that the next batch of 'importer' subjects of our perspectives and concepts will be the harder sciences and engineering - they will develop their own tailored in-house sociology. So it's not just the 'visibility' of our research now, as you put it; somehow we need to re-tool and re-orientate the coming generation. But again, by this I do not mean 'training' sociologists to count and derive certain things from batches of data, I mean cultivating acute, intelligent sociological minds able to get to workable substantive grip of scientific and tech matters, and to come up with important and interesting sociological ideas and issues. A tall order perhaps, but it's going to be necessary I feel if we are to avoid 'media studies' stigma. Meanwhile, we can certainly make the most of what we already do.

Response 32

With regard to Sociology (as compared to, say, Social Policy or Economics) impact needs to be defined quite broadly. While the direct impact of sociological research (say in feeding directly into legislative change) is likely to be limited the indirect impact can be massive, in terms of a whole array of audiences: students, media (especially serious journalism), government departments, NGOs, local authorities, voluntary sector agencies, trade unions, large employers all are exposed to and make use of sociological concepts and findings.

The impact of Economic Sociology is particularly impressive. Increasingly sociologists are becoming involved as expert advisers to all sorts of bodies. HOWEVER, it is increasingly hard to get funding.

As referees and peer reviewers, sociologists are much harder on each other's work than is the case with other disciplines. There is little sense of disciplinary loyalty or support. Witness the rankings in the RAE. We fall over ourselves to be critical and objective, which may be morally admirable, but is perhaps politically naive. A smaller proportion of sociology proposals get funded by the ESRC than in other disciplines – yet having reviewed from a range of disciplines I am not persuaded that our proposals are worse.

Also, many sociologists seem to have fallen prey to a methodological fetishism, apparently virtually ignoring content and conceptual interest.

It occurs to me that this might be linked to the fragmentation which is apparent in sociology - and which to my mind is a real problem. There is no common consensus any longer as to what should constitute a common core of the syllabus. Degrees are increasingly dissimilar, and the knowledge of new sociology graduates seems limited and full of holes. This may be prejudice on my part, but I feel they are not

sufficiently exposed to empirical sociology - too much abstracted theory, with a drift to the philosophical and cultural. Students know all about Baudrillard, Foucault and Deleuze, but don't know the work of, for example, Lockwood, Blauner, Oakley, Beynon.

Response 33

It is pretty disheartening to hear of, as you put it, crude notions of utility and impact, being bandied about. As a number of other people have observed, we must be prepared to avoid armchair sociology, and to speak with relevant 'users' of 'real life' people and organizations. Related to this, I have always felt that I should push myself harder to think through the policy implications and relevance of what I research. Having said that, we need to contest narrow notions of relevance and impact, and to map out the connections between our research and the everyday experiences and lives in contemporary society.

Response 34

The impact of the current financial constraints on Sociology and Social Policy at my institution has been considerable. We did very credibly in the last RAE but the majority of our research monies were then appropriated by our faculty for other financial uses. About half of our taught modules have been rationalised and we now have no HPL support, considerably upping our teaching load. It also now appears inevitable that our single honours sociology degree will also go, although prospective students will still be able to sign up for a half degree in Sociology. While this latter development is more to do with falling numbers of applicants for single honours Sociology, the overall picture is largely due to the need for budget cuts. Staff morale is not good and our future seems uncertain. It is not a good time to be a sociologist.

Response 35

If 'impact' is to be measured, a crucial question is: impact over what time period?

Much of sociology's impact is effected generation by generation. Members of a new generation get new ideas during their education, and act upon them - or react to them - during their subsequent lifetime.

I started my research into what people then called 'race relations' in 1950. I recollect how British people thought about those relations then. Over the past sixty years that thought has been transformed. Sociological research has played a major part in the transformation, not only in the UK but in European policies and - as I can testify from personal knowledge - at the United Nations.

Impact should not be measured in a way that excludes such considerations.

Response 36

Although you talk about this in relation to budget cuts and in terms of economic values, I believe that as sociologists, our first duty is to clarify that 'impact' - has to be defined in the forthcoming REF, should not be seen as, or even primarily as, an economic measure. As sociologists we understand economic power and impact only as one of the kinds of powers that exist in society, and as sociologists we need to make sure that our profession would not be reduced to social policy advisers to the government and continue to demand an autonomous space for thinking and research.

At the same time, I do generally welcome the paradigmatical shift in sociology, which was termed by Michael Burawoy as 'public sociology', and which legitimized the addition of the normative to the analytical and empirical as integral parts of the sociological perspective. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake even to aspire for a unitary perspective of sociologists in Britain or anywhere else, on what position 'public sociologists' would take, or assume that they would all be emancipatory and progressive.

So my response to you really has two components. One, which relates to the REF in which I hope that the BSA will take a strong position against interpreting 'impact' in economic terms, and would include 'esteem' factors as no less valid indicators of 'impact' than research income. This would also be a safeguard against interpreting 'impact' in reductionist applied terms, while at the same time it would take users' perspectives [of all kinds - the private and public sectors, community members and other academics] into account.

The other component relates to possible impacts of sociological contributions - theoretical and empirical - to debates and decision makings in relation to the 'state of the nation' - again, in a much wider way than just relating to the forthcoming budget cuts. Here, I would encourage more in-depth sociological interventions in non sociological as well as non academic forums - social, political and in the mass media. I do not believe that all sociologists can/should have a common position, nor do I believe that sociology has a predictive capacity. Nevertheless, I do believe that the 'sociological imagination' does provide a different and important perspective to that of economists, psychologists, social workers and politicians. It provides a perspective in which social processes and structures are explained as affected but not determined by individuals, in which social actors are constructed as interrelated and as positioned intersectionally and in which people are analyzed as affected by emotional, as well as cognitive perceptions which lead them to follow, as well as to resist, hegemonic social and political discourses.

I know that this is not a full answer to your questions - but maybe this is a beginning.

Response 37

My response to the question in hand is that I feel that academics such as myself are accountable to some extent to the public purse. In sociology this will mostly be accounted for in the delivery of teaching. As to research I feel the issue of utility directed at sociology is really bound up by the bigger picture of the role of the academy and the university. In a general climate of university curriculum shrinkage (we have seen many closures of Classics, Theology etc. departments in the last 15 years). It has not been clarified how the university sector responds as a whole to the call to utility, nor indeed is the latter clear. There is no need to rehearse arguments from physics and mathematics that we need art-for art's-sake research because the academy maintains and sustains a discursive resource from which many useful, often unforeseen consequences arise. My view is that the public purse should be happy to see that discursive academic resource maintained.

On the question of direct impact research I have to ask the questions: 'what does apparently useful sociological research actually do?; what is the "effect" of apparently useful research? Has anyone traced the impact of social research? What is the relation between social policy studies and social policy?'. I am for accountability to the public purse but I am also aware of Foucault's dictum, following that of Weber to some extent, that 'you may know what you do, and why you do what you do but you do not know what what you do does'. This goes for sociological research however useful it may appear - unless the important thing is to feign utility.

Response 38

I apologise for taking so long to contribute to this debate. Given the demands of the 'day job', this kind of discussion seems a luxury, although it clearly isn't.

I've read the replies already received, and would particularly like to endorse responses 20 and 21.

Medical sociologists form a significant part of the sociological community, and we spend much of our time engaging with 2 main communities. These are patients and the public, with whom we are now required to collaborate in the submission of research grants to the National Institute of Health Research; and also the community of health professionals with whom we often work very closely. In relation to the latter, much of work involves studying their everyday practice with the aim of supporting and improving it.

In this debate, we need to include 'contribution to practice' as well as contribution to policy.

Medical sociologists are also developing innovative ways of working with the public. I am thinking of Elliott and Williams' paper on "Developing public sociology through health impact assessment" (Sociology of Health and Illness, 2008, vol 30, no 7, pp 1101-1116). Their notion of 'new knowledge spaces' describes a process of mutual learning between publics, professionals and social scientists.

There is a rich seam of work here which can inform the debate about impact.